

I'll Knot Pronounce You

by Debby

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Summary: A rewrite of the infamous frog/wedding arc with action, adventure, and humor

I'll Knot Pronounce You

An Alternate View: INPY A Lois and Clark Story

An "alternative" for the third season's "wedding/frog" arc

by Debby Stark, debby@swcp.com

Author's Note: I'm putting imagination where my mouth is. I didn't like how the wedding/frog arc was handled on Lois and Clark/TNAS and crowed that I could write it better... so here I have tried to do so in five installments (to match the five episodes that made up the "argh"). I also believe that nearly every thought process described below could have been scripted and conveyed by competent acting and the use of flashbacks. I assure you that the following is in no way connected with my other epic, Dawning, also available on

<ftp://ftp.swcp.com/pub/users/dstark/Stories>

I present the first installment of the "argh" rewrite here. To save space on Fanfiction.net, I request that you visit my site and look for the numbered stories which make up the rest of this series:

2 Double Entendre 3 Seconds Helping 4 I'll Second That; and 5 Long Dazed Journey From The Night

They are also available from me via email at Debby@swcp.com

This installment was originally finished June 6, 1996, not long after the original shows were broadcast. * around words denotes italics.

I now present:

"I'll Knot Pronounce You..." or "I'll Never Pounce On *You*..." or "Patience Makes Perfect" or "Pardon me, Ms., is that a frog you're going to chew-chew?" or "Brown or Green, a Clone's Dilemma" or "Is Patience a Virtue or Is That a Banana in Your--"

THWAP!

Sorry. Now, on with the alternate show...

[informative recap of Tony Curtis part of episode. Run down of this act's new guest stars. All characters mentioned below who are not made up by author should be portrayed by the actors we've seen before. Commercials for new car; Australia vacation; Roseanne and Grace Under Fire.]

Clark Kent could not remember a time in all his 29 years that he had felt as happy as he did now.

As he heard Mendelssohn's Wedding March start up (Lois's mother had insisted on its use--"It's so *traditional!*"--while he and Lois had leaned toward Pachabel's "Canon" but not leaned hard enough) he bit his lip in anticipation. He stopped himself, licked his lips instead, stopped *that*, and decided on standing even taller and taking a deep, cleansing breath. He added an order to his subconscious not to allow him to float with joy, because he felt that coming on, too.

There were actually quite a few times in Clark's life that he had come this close to feeling such happiness. He easily recalled how his mom's face glowed when, at age three and a half, he had presented her with his first found-object Valentine's Day card, all finger painted (with butterscotch pudding) and lipsticked on some old bank statement he'd found on his father's desk. She hadn't even said a word about the mess on the dining room table. He remembered his dad hanging 4th-grade art class masterpieces around the barn to "content the cows" they had at that time. Helping a teammate score the winning touchdown in the final football game against Wheatdale in eighth grade. Lana Lang accepting his request that she accompany him to the sophomore dance. The first time he sat on the edge of a jungle canyon in the mountains in Peru, watching the sun rise. Perry White agreeing that the hack from Smallville was good enough to work at the world's greatest newspaper. The first meaningful, mutually-participated-in kiss with Lois Lane (up until he'd heard the bomb that killed poor Mayson).

There had been something close to this feeling during his and Lois's first encounter with a bizarre man named Tempus. Clark had insisted they compare notes after the man had kidnapped her a few weeks ago and she had to rescue herself practically before he had realized anything had happened. She had waved off his concerns. "I'm back," she claimed, light-heartedly at first. "I have you now, you're you, *you're* okay, *relax*, *I'm* relaxed, see? *See?* Nothing happened--Nothing! *Nothing's* going to happen, either, it will all be *Just Fine Now*--or I'll strangle someone!"

Uh-huh. The more she had insisted on the rightness of "everything now," the more he demanded that she explain what had happened. He could be just as stubborn, and for a good reason. Her being *totally

gone,* almost as though she had never made an appearance on this plane of existence, had torn at his heart. He wouldn't let her out of the range of no less than two of his finely honed and currently identified seven senses [note: the sixth was his often-resorted-to sense of well being, and the seventh, discovered after working with Lois for only a short time and still in need of sharpening, was his sense of impending doom]. This meant he had even stood around outside when she went to the ladies room.

At last she had relented. That evening over pizza and German chocolate cake ice cream she told him about those missing 10 seconds. In an alternate universe she had witnessed among other things a President Chuck Heston, Perry White running for office, and a sad, twice-orphaned Clark Kent, who she had turned into Superman to help her get back to her own universe. Simple, huh?

Right, simple.

Her experiences had also caused her to remember that they had faced Tempus several months earlier. After hearing a few key words, Clark began to remember as well. But neither of them had more than pieces of it, even when he told her what he had speed-read in Mazick's ancient diary. Something about 1866 or 1966 or both, and Smallville and cowboys, Utopia and bank robbers, a time machine and kryptonite... and, for Clark, Lois discovering who he masqueraded as. He remembered feeling so good about changing into the suit in front of her and her clapping her hands and looking pleased, like he had given her a gift.

That's what things felt like now, joyful, every Christmas wrapped into one.

The road to this wedding had been strewn with quite a few other obstacles, too, many of them due to simple miscommunication since it seemed he and Lois had so little opportunity to sit down and talk...

He took another deep breath and calmed his thoughts. They'd done some talking in the last week, and had even firmed up the last of the wedding plans, not letting Ellen Lane prevail in every case. She had backed off and only suggested Reverend Bob, an unemployed friend, but he had been called away and surprisingly now Perry was officiating, a big, proud grin on his flushed face.

Clark saw his bride and her father leave the ready room.

This very moment had come so close to not happening. On Tuesday, with Lois upset about the dead flowers and the smashed wedding cake, he'd suggested they go back to work for a while to keep their minds off the pranks. He regretted sounding patronizing because in reality he was upset, too, but he couldn't insist on watching over her this time with no more solid evidence, she would have thrown a fit.

Yet, he thought, they were both right to be nervous. The big wedding her mother had planned didn't mix well in his mind with their being attacked in the last six weeks alone by a killer microwave, a Kryptonian virus, Baron Sunday, an Asian Emma Peel wannabe, and Tempus. Perry's assignment had given him a good excuse to stick close to Lois--except during the typhoon, but he'd rescued 216 families and numerous cattle from raging floodwaters, and returned in time,

knowing Lois was in trouble, to prevent clone-master Dr. Mamba from killing her. Throw in saving the free world from a cloned president, and it had all (though they chose to reveal little of Lois's role) made a great story over their--soon obsolete?--byline. Hmm, obsolete... the byline was something else they needed to talk about, too.

But the interruptions hadn't stopped even then. Twenty-two minutes earlier Clark had overheard the church janitor's boombox announce a traffic alert: an oil tanker truck accident on I-95A near where Clark knew there was an elementary school and a large shopping mall. An explosion could kill hundreds. Clark had grabbed his father and staged whispered "I need to adjust this jacket, now!"

Jimmy, too close by, had perked up and followed Clark and his father toward the men's dressing room, which was on the other side of the church from the one the Lois would be using after she signed the license. Clark had turned on Jimmy and asked if his friend... knew where they kept the duct tape. Jimmy had no idea, he'd never been here. "I know, but I think I *really* need some, Jim--the Red Green brand if they have any."

Jimmy had understood the urgency if not the request and rushed away to search.

Clark had closed the door to the dressing room behind him and his father and exclaimed, "Dad, I need to go!"

"Well, the men's room is right in through--"

"Not *that* kind of go! *Go* as in..." he waved his hand in a 45-degree angle and added a screamingly silent expression.

"Oh." Jonathan Kent had nodded, locked the door to delay the entry of friendly help, opened the blinds and the window (which looked out on to a massive air conditioning unit and covering shrubbery), and turned to see that his son had already changed into the supersuit.

Clark had worked quickly, removing the leaking truck to a landfill, ice-breathing it down, and then clueing the converging authorities in to the hints of sabotage he had glimpsed. The truck's driver had survived and staggered out of the cab as soon as Superman had set it down. The driver was healing already--a clone! Yet noninjured parts of the fellow also seemed to be deteriorating, which reminded Clark of how, two years earlier, the clone of himself had been unable to maintain physical integrity and died. After the fall of Lex Luthor's empire, he and Lois had dug up a surprising number of secrets, and Lois had tied that first clone to Luthor. As soon as she had mentioned the criminal's name a few days ago, again in connection with clones, they had both checked: Luthor was still in prison.

That's *one* problem I don't have now, Clark sighed.

He'd sniffed a story in the truck sabotage, but reporters were among the police, and they would find out all there was to know. Probably. He could easily imagine Lois running with it because she had made it clear she wanted to root out anything with the scent of Lex Luthor in it. Her stunning testimony at his sanity hearing after his capture in

the sewer had helped insure he would be in high security lockdown for several lifetimes. At that time Clark hadn't thought it wise to ask for details of her earlier close encounters with the man, and she hadn't offered any. It was one of those unpleasant things they had to talk about eventually, but there would be plenty of time.

Clark had returned to the church eight minutes ago, rushed back into the right suit, and he and his dad and Jimmy had made it to the assembly hall right on time. Jimmy, unable to find any tape but relieved that CK hadn't need it after all, had been sympathetic about weak bladders during times of high emotions. Clark had no more than nodded his appreciation and given his friend a hug.

Once situated where rehearsal had told them they were supposed to be, Clark had calmed himself by chanting a few silent Hindu mantras. His dad fiddled with his tie again, mentioning something about Clark's sophomore dance and the tie he'd borrowed then. Did he remember wanting to wear the one with the hula dancer? His mom made even more tickled-pink comments and brushed invisible lint off Clark's back. When the music started, the two retired to their seats of honor on "his" side of the church, leaving him alone, in the limbo between being only a son and becoming someone's husband.

Lois was on the arm of her tall, distinguished-looking (Baby Gunderson-free) father. They turned and started down the aisle toward Clark.

She was really something. Her long white dress was stunning. He didn't know much about fashion, but he knew she looked no less than great in anything she wore.

Or out of anything she wore, probably, he smiled at himself. Interestingly, his patience seemed to be holding remarkably well. It was as though the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life hadn't just entered the room and wasn't going to "sweep him away to her boudoir" once they "survived the formalities," as she'd put it during a hasty phone call that morning. He wondered if he was tired after the super rescue he'd pulled off minutes before: he should, he thought, have been distracted to near arousal.

Lois must have changed her mind; she was wearing a veil. She had mentioned that since that had certain connotations and, well, she was an experienced woman and... she had fidgeted. Clark had said that whatever she wore was fine with him, and one of them should have some "experience" in *that* area, huh? That had made her smile. Why she worried so much about what he would think was still a mystery to him.

She looked up as though estimating the distance between them. A good 30 feet yet. Friends (mostly his) and relatives (mostly hers) on both sides of the aisle turned to watch her. She slowed just a little. Her father slowed a bit to match her pace. Clark thought she was probably overconscious of being the center of attention. She kept her face and body pointed straight ahead, but he saw her eyes dart from side to side, as though surprised both by the sheer number of people and that all of them were smiling at her. Clark had observed that she never seemed to believe how many friends she really had, or that all of them wished to see her happy.

As her father patted her hand, she looked forward again. Her eyes met

Clark's.

He smiled, barely containing a big grin. This is it, this is really almost it, Lois! We deserve this! I know I shouldn't be thinking of it like that--tempting fate and all--but by gosh we've done so much for the world, the world can relax for a *little* while and let us have this wonderful time together...

The corners of Lois's mouth curved up ever so slightly. Clark wondered if she was also considering flinging convention to the wind and grinning out loud. Could be. That made him feel more confident, and he tried to exude that feeling and send it to her over the gulf between them.

But then her smile collapsed before it got near to being reflected in her eyes. She looked him up and down. She blinked, raised her eyebrows as though to encourage the rest of her face to lift as well, and made another attempt. This one was more successful and it lasted three second longer... before falling, too. Yet, she didn't look panicky or afraid, just... just... wooden.

It struck Clark suddenly that this woman didn't look like Lois.

--oh, she *looked* like Lois, the right dress, the right hair, the right little mole on her left upper lip when she didn't cover it with make-up...

But she appeared smaller and less substantial somehow. Her face looked somewhat drawn, as though she hadn't been getting enough sleep. Before this very moment, her haircut had made her look new and fresh regardless of how she wore it. He recalled commenting to that effect upon first seeing it, and she had smiled and said that *she* felt new and fresh, as a woman in love should, right? He was sure that was so, and wondered what he could do in return to express the same thing. Since he couldn't cut his hair any more--she didn't like buzz cuts, she said--maybe he should grow it out, hmm? He'd laughed and said he'd consider it, though short was easier to slick back for his superdisguise.

Rather than framing her face in the wave she had told him she would wear and the clips in it earlier had attested to, her hair was now pulled back strictly under the veil. This made her look somehow younger--or, rather, juvenile and lacking in depth.

Clark blinked, but at himself for having such uncalled-for thoughts. He made a gargantuan effort to keep all traces of doubt off his face. No one had noticed, he was sure; they were all drinking in the vision of loveliness approaching him.

But... she wasn't lovely.

She wasn't... anything.

Clark shook himself internally. *Why* am I thinking this? This is horrible! What's wrong with me?

Her third attempt at a smile was successful because she plastered it on, or so it looked to Clark, his dismay growing in more directions than he could check. The expression looked rehearsed. Add to that,

Clark saw that her eyes seemed to glaze, as though an diaphanous membrane had slid over them. She looked slightly to his left. It took no obvious effort on her part to simply stop looking at him.

For some awful reason Clark felt relieved.

She focused on Perry, who was still grinning and shuffling self-consciously. This was his big day, too. Alice had agreed to attend due to her friendship with the bride and groom. Perry had confided in Clark, there on the church steps some 30 minutes earlier, that he wasn't going to miss this chance to romance her a bit. Clark had been pleased; there was magic in the air, more than enough to go around.

Or there had been.

Now the air seemed stale and even dismal--

Stop this, Kent! She's just *nervous*! Maybe... maybe she came looking for you while you were dealing with the tanker problem, she panicked when Dad couldn't explain, and she hasn't calmed down yet. So this could be the ill luck inspired by his seeing her before the ceremony. There hadn't been anything he could do about that though; Perry had insisted they wait on the church steps and enjoy cool the breeze.

Maybe, he thought, she's angry that I lied when I said I signed the marriage license. He'd had so much on his mind that he had forgotten all about it until the Deacon asked Lois to accompany him to do that. Clark had decided to give her something to feel superior about, that might ease her nervousness when she saw the blank line where he should have signed it. She'd think even Superman has his forgetful moments--and probably vow to extract wicked revenge that very night.

Oh, boy...!

The Deacon had no doubt assured her that it wasn't a legal thing, just a sign off confirmation that some ceremony had taken place. The hour they had spent in line at the courthouse had been what counted if she wanted to get technical. Odd the Deacon hadn't asked him, Clark, to accompany them, but there it was. Maybe, Clark thought, she'd think it a good idea when he told her that he wanted to sign it at the reception in the newsroom, at her desk--even though he just now thought of this. Some plan, he thought ruefully.

But as he contemplated the proposed signing scenario for half a second, his guilt turned inexplicably to relief about having lied...

He closed his eyes and ordered himself to absolutely STOP thinking like this.

Maybe it was something in *him,* something alien. Maybe this ceremony, basically common to all humans, was a genetic anathema to Kryptonians, who were programmed to do something else entirely and think bizarre thoughts about the one they loved most in the world if the program was disrupted...

That sounds stupid even to me, he sighed.

Lois and her father stepped in even pace with the music.

Her father let her go at a pre-planned spot. She smiled brilliantly at him, gave him a light kiss (both of which appeared to surprise the man), and she handed her bouquet of roses to some aunt who had flown in from Texas.

On her own now, she hesitated. This was probably one of those big crossroads for a woman, Clark thought. Go symbolically from one man to another--or jump on a fast horse and head for the hills to join the wild women.

She stepped forward, toward him, two careful paces. Clark offered her his left arm as they had rehearsed. It occurred to him that she might not take it.

But she did. Her arm felt skinny and sticklike. Despite their physical closeness, she seemed withdrawn. Regardless of her smile, he felt that she was cold, but not a shivering kind of cold--air cold for it was a humid 82 degrees in here. No, it was more like cold blooded.

Clark tried not to notice.

I'm sick, he thought, sick, sick, sick.

He held his hands clutched before himself as he had been advised to do. Reverend Bob had made a joke about the bride grabbing on to the groom and holding on for all he was worth, and the groom needing only to worry about hanging onto his wallet.

I wish that was all I had to worry about, Clark thought.

He took a last glance as a bachelor at his proud parents. His mother was close to happy tears, and his father looked like he might lose control and join her. The Lanes, on the other side of the aisle, were not only sitting together and not tearing at each other's hair, they were actually arm in arm. Clark worked up a smile all for them and particularly for the two people he trusted most in the world. There was *no way* he would let on to anyone that he was having idiotic second, third and fourth thoughts about this.

He completed the turn away from the old world to stand beside his wife-to-be in front of Perry, who somehow represented the new world and Clark's new role in it.

Perry, totally unprepared despite his protestations that he knew what to say, made a few endearing quips. Clark logged them in some part of his mind.

Lois bit her lower lip briefly. Clark noted that while she might have appeared alert to the only other person who could see her, Perry, he wasn't looking at her but addressing, even rallying the well wishers. Lois was letting her gaze wander in a distracted manner. It didn't seem that she was nervous, at least not like he was. If pressed, Clark would have admitted that his knees were a bit weak and that he felt hypersensitive.

What he didn't feel was any... warmth from her. Also, to some one who

knew her moods as well as he did, the woman on his arm was acting almost bored. It was almost as though she might have preferred to be watching TV or shopping for groceries.

A tiny but steady, undeniable voice said simply: "This isn't Lois."

Clark wanted to scream "NO!" at the voice.

Except that he feared it was right.

He felt his world begin to crumble--then he demanded all that come to a screeching halt right now. He simply couldn't afford to let slip any hint of what he alone suspected. He noted that his face was cooperating, that he was still managing an I'm-mighty-glad-to-be-here smile.

Perry was making winding-up sounds.

If this really wasn't his Lois but an actress, Clark thought, the real Lois was somewhere else and in trouble. Whoever had her probably expected him not to realize the truth for some time. That could mean they wouldn't harm her as long as Clark Kent--star investigative reporter yet apparently thought to be a first-class, insensitive idiot--remained clueless.

I've been clueless in the past, true, but we're talking about *Lois* here... or there... or wherever...

So that means I simply can't do *nothing...*

Perry suggested that Clark take the ring from Jimmy. As rehearsed, Clark turned automatically. He saw that Jimmy was watching him. The young man looked like a nervous puppy trying to learn how to sit and stay sat. He held up the ring box, pulled it back, opened the box, and held that out. His hands were trembling slightly.

Look, Clark said to himself, I'm not shaking at all and I should be from either joy--or fury. Maybe this *is* a Kryptonian thing...

He took the ring. He remembered the dozens of shops he and Lois had visited three weeks earlier searching for just the right wedding bands.

He and Lois, if this was her ("It's not," the voice said), faced each other.

She was smiling, though the expression didn't quite reach to her eyes. It was closer than it had been though, so it looked like she was getting into the mood.

But this was the one thing the real Lois would have had no doubts about.

I don't know who you are, Clark heard the analytical side of his mind mutter at her, but you're not getting away with this.

Perry said, "Now you say, 'I, Clark, take thee, Lois, to love, honor, and cherish--for as long as I live.'"

These were not the vows that Lois and Clark had written for themselves. Lois's mom had perused the final draft, smiled fondly, and then slipped the simple sheet of paper into her "to-do" file. When asked about having received the prose, Rev. Bob had claimed he was memorizing it even as they spoke.

Clark repeated, trying to put some heart into it anyhow, "'I, Clark... take thee... Lois... to love, honor, and cherish... for as long as I live.'"

He then offered her the ring.

She stared at it for a moment, shook herself almost imperceptively, and smiled as though it had occurred to her that this part was okay. She held up her hand.

She was wearing the engagement ring. It was the ring that his mother had given him. It had originally belonged to his beloved Grandmother Clark, who had sung to him and rocked him to sleep many times when he was "No larger than a thimble."

He wanted to grab this imposter and demand where she had gotten the precious piece of memory, if her cohorts had yanked it off of Lois's hand and injured her in any way.

If she was lying dead somewhere--

No!

No, I'd know that...!

She's all right. She's just not here, but I'll find her, soon.

But for the moment he rebelled subtly.

"The ring doesn't fit..." "Lois" said, disappointed, as Clark's gentle moves failed to work the jewelry on to her finger. "Here, give it to me." She grabbed it from him, but try as she might, and because of the crimp he had put in it moments earlier, her efforts failed. "Darn..." she said.

Clark noticed that a hush had fallen over the assembly.

"I guess..." She looked up at Clark, blanched ever so slightly, and then she looked at Perry, the sight of whom was apparently less threatening. "I guess this means we're not married?"

Lois's mother let out a gasp. Several other people felt free to do so then. Clark didn't look in the direction of the assembly, instead pursing his lips to express his concern--and taking the opportunity to search the woman's face. There was, for example, no trace of the bruise and minor gash she had sustained in their encounter with Bob Fences. Make-up couldn't have hidden that from him and his strained-through-his-glasses telescopic vision. This woman's employers hadn't thought of that.

"No, honey," Perry said quickly, "don't worry, it's just a formality."

That's not *worry,* Chief, Clark thought drily. Whoever she is, they

obviously didn't pay her enough to keep pretending to want to be here once she caught sight of me.

He wondered briefly if she planned to throw a fit, proclaim to the world that she didn't love him, and stomp out, back to her employers to demand more money. If this had been the hard-bitten woman who had imitated Lois for Adrianna Carlin, Clark wouldn't have been surprised.

But he doubted this would happen, that he would have to charge after her and prove that she wasn't Lois. This actress, as bad as she was, wouldn't have let things get this far had that been part of the script. No, she was probably going to stick with it until after some pre-determined amount of time had passed.

Clark thought back quickly. Odds were Lois had been abducted while he was distracted by the tanker accident. He had heard the news only seconds after the Deacon had guided Lois away. The accident could have been a set up to preoccupy Superman, who many had thought would be at the ceremony standing by his two friends and maybe vying for Jimmy to be best man. Lois and Clark had whispered some story about Superman being delayed, though many thought the Man of Steel had a broken heart and wouldn't show up at all.

Unfortunately, whoever had set up the diversion hadn't heard the whispers and didn't realize that naive Clark had been the real patsy.

The woman said "Awww..."

"It's just a ring," Perry assured her

"I'll get it fixed," Clark said as brightly as he could muster.

The woman smiled about that. "Oh, good, I like it--you know what?" she leaned forward a bit, the closest she had voluntarily come to him, looked up, and whispered confidentially, "it matches my earrings," and she pushed her right earlobe forward to show him the light-weight clip-on jewelry she was wearing. Many of the male well-wishers in the assembly leaned forward in an attempt to see what she was doing.

Clark backed up slightly as though to get a better look, nodded in amiable agreement, and tried to chuckle.

Perry laughed out, relieved and trying to put everyone at ease. In a moment he said, "Okay, Lois," Perry said, "your part's next. Take the other ring..."

The woman looked at him blankly as she clutched the crimped ring.

Lois's cousin said "Psst!"

The woman turned and stared at her, then looked down at what the younger woman was holding. "Oh! Yeah, heh..." She took the ring and looked at it. Clark wondered if she would bite it to see if it was real.

I'm resorting to heavy-duty cynicism, he thought; it must be a

defense mechanism. I wish I were better at it...

"That's right," Perry said gently. "Now, repeat after me: 'I, Lois, take thee, Clark, to...' ah..."

The woman darted a worried glance at him, as though thinking now that if this didn't work she wouldn't get the jewelry she'd already practically been promised.

"Oh, yeah, sorry. 'To love, honor, and cherish, for as long as I live.'"

The woman nodded; this was more like it. She looked straight at Clark, piercing a stare right into his eyes, through them and his head, and at the far wall of the church.

"'I-Lois-take-thee-Clark-to-love-honor-and-cherish-for-as-long-as-I-live.'" Then she smiled at herself, obviously pleased she'd said it without stumbling.

"Now put the ring on Clark's finger..."

"Oh, okay."

Yeah, Clark thought, that's why I'm holding my hand up here, you... you... Hollywood reject.

The ring slipped on easily. He immediately took her hands and held them, not allowing her to retrieve them despite her obvious (to him) effort to do so.

"Now," Perry announced, "in the name of the First Church of Blue Suede Deliverance, I pronounce you husband and wife!"

As the music swelled, Clark donned a pleased smile and leaned forward, tilting his head slightly, his intent clear to every nonimposter in the room.

The woman gulped, withdrew for half a second, closed her eyes, tilted her head, and proceeded to allow him to kiss her.

She did a reasonably good job of faking interest, Clark thought.

Her breath smelled somewhat earthy. When Lois was worried about such encounters she always used a ton of breath mints. Always. He had lately convinced her that she shouldn't be worried, particularly around him. When she was relaxed and feeling kissable, no mints.

This would not be one of those times, though; indeed, early in the afternoon even he had briefly considered asking his dad if he had any such back-up insurance. It wouldn't do to kiss his bride and have her shy away from super-nervous bad breath... Add to that, despite a layer of attractive lipstick, this woman's lips tasted dry and somewhat cold.

His heart still held an ounce of hope that he was entirely wrong about all this though. It pushed his logical brain aside and urged him to take her face in his hands and plant a deep, meaningful kiss on her, the kind that lately he and Lois had been sharing at the drop

of a hat. It didn't take much encouragement; he was feeling desperate at this point to get a Lois-like response from this woman.

She participated somewhat more enthusiastically than for the first kiss, but not with the abandon the real Lois did at times even in front of an audience like at the newsroom. This actress kept her hands on his waist where she had put them for the first kiss, as though ready to dip into his pockets. She did not move her hands to embrace him roughly, greedily, to glue herself to him, to throw him over her hip and let him have it, stunning the world.

Sorry, heart, this isn't Lois at all...

The friends and relatives began to applaud and, led by his folks, they stood and turned it into a real roar. Perry wiped tears from his eyes, and Jimmy comforted him. The woman was being embraced by Lois's happy cousin, and Sam and Ellen Lane jumped up and joined in, gushing about how beautiful it had all been. Clark reminded himself to beam like a newlywed should and nod to his folks, who had risen to congratulate him. He agree with his dad that he was glad that this part was over and with his mom that it had been wonderful, yes, he had a whole new life ahead of him now, wow...

...but he felt sick inside.

Clark knew by the time he and the woman reached the reception site that he had to confide in someone. The ride in the limo to the Daily Planet parking garage was totally uneventful and that was the problem. They should have been tearing at each others clothing, Lois trying to make him loose his patience and him bravely struggling (and perhaps joyfully failing) to retain it a little while longer.

But this wasn't Lois.

He made an effort to engage the woman in a conversation--in the event they were being monitored, at least this would expected--but she answered him in monosyllables, didn't seem to want to look at him, and displayed more interested in watching the scenery rolling by, as though it was all new to her. She did show one burst of emotion: she pulled off the veil and shook out her hair, claiming dramatically that she hated rice.

Clark knew that Lois liked rice and most of what had been thrown at them as they left the church had been bird seed and shredded, biodegradable newsprint anyway.

He decided, what the heck, and took off his jacket and loosened his tie. She didn't comment on this. He got the impression that if he had stripped naked and flown loops around her singing "Don't Be Blue" he would have gotten the same reaction. She better get her act together, he thought, or people in the newsroom will surely notice her singular lack of enthusiasm.

He began to wonder when she planned to make her exit, how long she'd play this out, and if he could get away first and get the jump on whoever was holding Lois.

The limo dropped them off shortly thereafter. They were first to

arrive, but the rest of the wedding party was right on their tail, so the elevator was full as it headed up to the newsroom and the attached lunch room, where the reception dinner would be served. Mr. Stern was footing the bill for this, though Mrs. Lane had insisted that her exhusband supply a large number of special treats. Martha and Jonathan Kent had put their feet down softly but firmly and picked out and paid for the wedding cake.

Clark didn't feel hungry. Actually, he had never felt quite this empty in his life. Lois was alive and needing him, but he couldn't see any way to escape that wouldn't look extremely rude and maybe even make things worse because the imposter would alert her friends.

He was glad for his first chance to get away from her for a few minutes, but not so happy that a large number of his male friends crowded into the men's room to "help" him change into more comfortable clothing.

They talked about women and married life. He absorbed it all into some spare portion of his conscious for later reference--for when Lois was safe again. He spent a good bit of the rest of his free time comforting Jimmy, who swore up and down that the ring had been in *perfect* shape when he'd handed it to his best friend at the ceremony.

"I was nervous," Clark assured him, realizing he hadn't thought of the other repercussions of the trick. "I held it too tightly, it was my fault." This is all my fault...

Earl from Travel chimed in with "Soft gold," these things happen. Lois's Uncle Mike said something about his late wife's fingers swelling up at a certain time of month. Mike hoped that it wasn't *that* time for Lois, what with her and Clark wanting to, well...

Clark allowed that all this could be important factors--and reminded himself to get both rings back from that woman at his first opportunity. Almost as soon as they had parted after Clark's dramatic though useless kiss, she had opened the neckline of her--Lois's--wedding dress and dropped the wedding ring down into safe keeping. At least 90% of his men's room friends thought that Clark should have gone diving for it there in the back of the limo, hint-hint...

They made sure he knew where the food had been laid out. The lunch room was decorated with flowers, banners and homemade signs expressing good wishes. If it hadn't been for the fact that it wasn't Lois they thought he was married to, Clark knew he would have found the declarations of love and respect almost as overwhelming as the ceremony should have been.

The cake was spectacular. White with chocolate trim, four tiers, a little plastic bride and groom on top under a little plastic grape arbor ("The closest we could get to Kent Orchards," Clark's father explained in an aside). Jimmy produced a camera and began taking pictures. He asked Clark to stand by the cake for a few shots. Some wished Clark hadn't changed out of his fine suit, but his current casual sports jacket and purple tie with orange butterflies looked... nice.

That woman showed up a few minutes later. She was surrounded by a bevy of friends commenting on how quickly she had changed into a quiet pink dress while closed away in one of the restroom stalls. They said she had done almost the same thing earlier when dressing for the wedding, though then she had locked them and even her own mother completely out of the dressing room, "by accident." The ever-competent Lois Lane had bridal jitters, they said, it figured, but she was relaxing now, that was good.

She was coaxed over to the cake and more pictures were taken. Clark noted that she employed the plastered-on smile again. They were guided through the traditional first cutting and serving of the cake, and it was suggested that they feed first pieces to each other.

Another test, Clark thought dully. The woman eyed the white delicacy he offered her on a fork, closed her eyes, opened her mouth, opened her eyes when someone said it looked liked she was scared, and Clark slipped in the small portion. She smiled bravely, choked it down, and then claimed to be too nervous to do the same for him. Clark said that was okay. Ellen Lane insisted that she just *had* to do it, and Martha Kent said that it would be another nice picture for their album, so the woman relented, grabbed up a piece on a spoon and shovelled it into Clark's mouth. He smiled indulgently as he brushed off the resulting crumbs, and people chuckled about the bride's obvious nervousness and what it could inversely translate into during the night to come. Jimmy muttered something about being happy he had fast film.

That part over, the cake and the buffet were descended upon by all the reception attendees, which included everyone from the church and the entire newsroom crew.

Everyone from the church except the Deacon. Clark wondered if the shy church employee had been invited--but more importantly, had he been the last one to see Lois before she was kidnapped?

Clark, ordering himself to get to work on the problem, faded away from the crowd and began looking for allies. He wanted to think he was able to clean up this mess on his own, but he realized he was bereft of clues and had only one tenuous lead, the Deacon, who, at the rate things were going, probably didn't know anything.

The elevator landing, out of the way and overlooking the on-going business of the newspaper, was one of the few places where guests apparently felt comfortable about gathering to eat and chat. There, far to one end, Clark cornered the only man in the world he could trust with everything. "Dad," he whispered, "I have a problem, a big problem."

"Well, if its that fingers-swelling thing, Clark," Jonathan said as he enjoyed a plateful of cake and petit fours, "she'll get over it in a few days. Your mother can probably suggest herbs and vitamins for her to use."

"No, it's not that, it's something worse than that."

"Worse? I suppose there are worse things that could happen on your honeymoon night..." Jonathan put on a comforting smile.

Good grief, Dad, what **are** you thinking? "Believe me, this is worse than that."

"Worse than what?" Perry said as he strolled up the ramp, a cup of ginger ale in hand. Clark had seen him coming and hoped the man would veer off to the right but instead he had hung a left.

"Just a little... problem, Chief--Ah, I don't think I got to thank you properly for..." his throat wanted to constrict on the word "rescuing... us, Lois and me..."

"Oh, think nothing of it. Alice told me I did a good job, so **you've** given **me** a wedding gift!"

"Maybe I shouldn't put out an all-points-bulletin for that Reverend Bob then," Inspector Henderson commented as he glided up the ramp next. He looked somehow austere despite the yellow rose in his lapel, the cocktail wieners and the deviled eggs on his paper plate, and the slight smile on his face that indicated to those who knew him that he was having a jolly old time.

He and Clark shook hands and Clark said that frankly he didn't care to see that man again, thanks. Though maybe, Clark thought, the Reverend's disappearance was connected with this, too: had it not been for Perry's offer, the ceremony might have been into chaos, providing more cover for the kidnappers.

Clark didn't add that there was only one man he wanted to see at the moment, but as he thought that, Jimmy bounded out of the elevator and Mike Lane began looking their way. Clark stopped thinking about finding some privacy. He decided there was time, that he could wait for a few more minutes. Just as long as his father didn't wander away, Clark could get him and maybe Mom to cover, suit up and start searching the city for Lois. After all, he had absolutely no desire to traipse out of here with that woman.

That woman emerged from her second trip to the lunch room. She had a plate heaped high with food. Talk about starving artist, Clark thought. There was a dribble of something spilled down the front of her dress, but someone had strategically placed a corsage to hide most of it. Friends were hovering around and chatting with her, but the woman was ignoring them, concentrating on the food, so the friends were abandoning her slowly, which, Clark knew, would have left the real Lois distraught. She had wanted this to be so special...

It **will** be, Lois, after I get through with whoever's done this to us--and, yes, okay, we write it up for the morning edition.

Lois's father joined the men on the landing, pointed out his daughter and chuckled fondly about her always having been a loner and a klutz. Clark felt the immediate urge to defend her... except the actress **was** content to be left alone and **was** a klutz, obviously...

The men went on to comment on how Clark would be a soothing influence on the wild woman, an anchor, and "a good father," Franklin Stern added, patting Clark on the back.

Down in the pit the wild woman commandeered an unused desk--not her

own, which would have been inconceivable for the very territorial Lois--and looked around herself, warily guarding her stash. Clark noted that alarmed staffers tried to avoid her.

Martha Kent danced up the steps. "This is so wonderful!" She hugged practically everyone, saving her son for last and sticking with him, her arm around him as though she were having second thoughts about giving him over to another woman's care.

She probably thinks I'm on the edge of exhausted collapse, too, Clark sighed. "Yeah, it's great, mom. Even the flowers you picked were perfect."

"I thought you two would like something a little simpler."

"And cheaper," Sam Lane laughed. "I thank you, too, Mrs. Kent!"

"Oh, now, call me Martha..." She got proper names sorted out and they were all on first-name basis in moments, except Inspector Henderson, who apparently had no first name or no inclination to divulge it. Instead the man turned away and was watching the crowd below in the pit. Many of those he saw were busy at work, most of them were munching on goodies, and all of them were, Clark noticed, giving a wide berth to the bride way over at the desk in the corner near the bookcase reference library.

"Look at Lois," Martha said next. Clark got the distinct impression that his mother was alarmed but trying to put the best face on things. "She's so... nervous! She even offered to stay and wash the dishes when the reception is over! But I told her no, she has more..." she gave Clark a squeeze, "*important* things to do than stay here and get dishpan hands. Then," Martha smiled, "she asked me to explain 'dishpan hands'..."

The men shook their heads and chuckled about the high-strung Lois Lane.

She's not high strung, Clark thought, and she's not Lois.

"Well, she has nothing to be nervous about," Henderson commented. "I have this place surrounded now."

"Surrounded?" Perry asked. "I've noticed the security detail seems to have been beefed up..." and he gave the owner of the Daily Planet an inquiring, why-didn't-you-tell-me-about-this? look.

"Not at *my* request," Franklin Stern said, his deep voice taking on a hint of concern as he bounced Perry's look right back at him and added a can't-your-people-take-care-of-themselves? eyebrow.

"No, it was at my request," Henderson said drily. "What with Lex Luthor released this morning because no one realized the pardon was fake until too late..."

Everyone on the landing turned to stare at him. Since they were all speechless, he continued, "I got a call just after the ceremony--which was quite nice, by the way. My wife and I got married in Las Vegas and gambled for three days straight and not all of that time was spent in casinos... Anyhow, I immediately assigned several

of my people to watch over you two, Clark, until we've rounded up that felon again. We already had Betty Reed in place--and here she comes, hello, Betty, you look nice... The FBI, the US Marshal Service, the Secret Service, the state police and at least half a dozen tabloid TV shows are all looking for him, so it's only a matter of time, you two don't have anything to worry about."

You're wrong about that, Clark informed him silently, though Lex being a free man could be just an unhappy coincidence. There were numerous others, Intergang being the most obvious, who could be behind this disaster.

But maybe the Inspector and Detective Reed were unexpected potential allies in figuring this out. He eased over toward them, taking his mom with him mostly because she was still hugging him and he wasn't eager for her to let go.

"Inspector, Betty, there is something I should talk to you about," Like about how you're wasting your people's time here, he thought. "I think Lois... isn't quite herself..."

"The way she's wolfing down that food," Sam Lane smiled, "there will certainly be *more* of her sooner than you bargained for."

"That's not bad," Jimmy said in her defense. "She looks like she's lost some weight."

"It's the excitement," Martha assured them. "She'll calm down soon..."

"I don't think so," Clark said.

"As long as we can keep her from finding out about Luthor's escape, we'll be in the clear," Perry said somberly. "She's had a rough time of it these last few weeks, you both have, and neither of you needs to worry about him, too."

"I don't think she'll be worried," Clark said, realizing that no one was listening, that he was just thinking out loud and no one wanted to hear such thoughts anyhow, least of all him.

Henderson though was listening and was looking at him in a speculative manner. They exchanged glances. The gaunt man frowned ever so briefly, an expression that spoke volumes to Clark, who felt a glimmer of relief.

"You kids really need that honeymoon," Perry smiled. "In fact, Alice and I could use another one, too! Oh, and there she is..."

They looked out over the newsroom and saw Mrs. White, a rather portly, Barbara-Bush-style person, approach that woman. That woman looked up at her, startled, and encircled her plate of food with her arms.

"Isn't she lovely?" Perry asked. "Two of the most beautiful women on earth... and one of them mighty hungry by the looks of it!"

"Yeah, CK, you better take her home--soon!" Jimmy poked him in the ribs and then shook his hand because Clark hadn't foreseen the move and cushioned the blow. "Ow... Take her home, before she hears about

Luthor, sends *me* to take pictures of him, and then tackles what's left of the cake..."

Mrs. White turned away slightly as though she hadn't actually been headed toward that woman and began to circuit the room. Clark could see her ending up on the landing here in a moments, too. The more I want some privacy, he sighed, the more friends I wind up with.

"I don't think Lois has heard anything about him, but she certainly is hungry," Martha said. "Actually, she asked me the funniest thing! We were in the lunch room and I was serving and she said she was starving, what with all the excitement. No, *I* said it was the excitement and she agreed. But it was obvious. She was at a loss for words, waiting to be swept off her feet and... carried away..." She squeezed her son again affectionately. Clark smiled, embarrassed (though he didn't figure he'd received his increased quota of hugs yet). He was not pleased, however, that anyone expected him to carry or fly that woman away even though they didn't understand.

His mom chuckled. "She asked if I knew if there was any--get this: pate de frog-gras! She's been to Paris and I thought she knew French, but that was so funny!" Martha wiped a mirthful tear from her eye. "She kept the straightest face... Anyhow, I pointed out the vegetarian pate and the escargot..."

"Escargot, gad," Sam Lane said, shaking his head. "You can't imagine what that cost me..."

"Did someone say escargot?" Ellen Lane asked as she joined the group. "I had them put extra garlic in the butter sauce so Lois would like it, she loves garlic..."

Lois had wanted to save her father some money and asked her mother not to order a ton of that delicacy. Her mother had told Lois not to worry; her father was made of money and would enjoy the unmaking or better enjoy it. Lois had looked at Clark. Clark had cleared his throat and said he was... allergic to snails. Then don't eat them, dear, Ellen Lane had advised him.

"But she told me there was too much garlic, she couldn't taste the snail at all. Personally, I thought the garlic was just right. I think she's been eating at..." she eyed Mike Lane almost distastefully, "*burger joints* too often lately..."

Clark fought through the distracting comments because something had struck him and it hurt. "Frog?" he asked faintly, wondering if he could or wanted to be heard. Clues were clamoring around in his head, screaming at him.

Lex Luthor, a childish "acting" Lois, her hesitancy to even look at him, her disliking garlic, wanting escargot, asking about

"Frogs..." Inspector Henderson muttered.

Their eyes met again.

"Oh, God," Clark said.

(commercial break)

(unenlightening trailer for next episode)

(three weeks later, real time)

"Double's Trouble"

or

"Double or Nothing"

or

"Double, Double, Lois in Trouble"

or

"Frog and Away"

or

"Frog Be It Unto Me"

or

[superimpose review of previous weeks' episodes, ending with Clark whispering "Oh, God..."]

His friends stared at Clark Kent. He had just done the equivalent of, for him, swearing like a sailor.

But he didn't care. It was all much worse than he had dreamed. He began to wish this were only a simple nightmare starring Intergang. Then he could deal with easily and then wake up. Lex Luthor seemed to be a neverending bad dream on the order of the Black Plague...

The realization of what was going on tumbled through the little crowd on the landing, which remained surprisingly calm, as though this turn of events wasn't exactly a bombshell given the couple involved.

Henderson took advantage of the shocked lull to immediately collar Perry. "I need a private room that's been recently swept for listening devices."

Mr. Stern raised his other eyebrow.

Perry suggested his office.

Henderson quietly grabbed Clark by his arm and pulled him in such a way that it looked like neither of them were actually moving. Clark, who was feeling way too malleable at the moment, followed along meekly, and Martha, still hugging her son, guarded his rear there in the center of the crowd that eased unobtrusively toward the editor's office.

The next thing Clark knew he was sitting in Perry's chair, a first for him. It felt dangerous.

Henderson was bending slightly at his waist; Clark could almost hear

the man's spine protest. Henderson was staring down at him. Indeed, everyone was looking at Clark with a mix of confusion and hope for an explanation Clark knew he didn't have. He felt rather like they had stripped him and found the suit, except he wasn't wearing it under his regular clothing because he had foreseen the restroom clothes-changing gathering.

He noted that the office's blinds had all been drawn, that Betty was guarding the door, and that there was the hum of the to-human-ears-inaudible listening device scrambler Perry had installed a few months earlier.

"All right, Clark, when did you suspect that Lois had been replaced?"

Huh?

Oh.

Ah... "When... when she was walking up the aisle toward me..." So late, so very late to realize that...

"What gave her away? She looked like the perfect blushing bride to me."

A mumble of agreement went through the most of nine others in the room.

"But wait, she wasn't blushing!" Lois's mother protested. "Lois never blushes."

"Figure of speech. Clark?"

Clark (who had seen Lois blush numerous times) felt his father's hand firmly on his shoulder, imparting strength.

Yeah, Clark wondered, how *could* he tell it wasn't Lois? What logical way was there to explain his feeling--or rather lack thereof? "I don't know, she just..." He looked down; he felt heavy. What use was it being Superman if he couldn't even formulate a grammatically correct sentence? "Oh, God..."

Henderson bent a bit further, really throwing himself into it. "*Any* clues?"

"She didn't... didn't kiss like Lois..."

There was the mutter of agreement, as though nearly everyone had been thinking this but had been at great pains to avoid admitting it.

"And that clinched it for you?"

"Yes..."

"All right, that's a... a clue."

"I think it happened, the switch, it must have happened just before ceremony," while I as gone and not there protecting her... "I should have been watching over her..."

"Oh? And so you planned to rush out as soon as you could to save her yourself then?"

"Yes, of course..." like I'm doing right now...

"Have you seen her naked yet?"

Appalled at the quietly stated question, Clark immediately frowned up at the man. "I most certainly have not! Not Lois *or* that... that..." he pointed.

"Clone." Henderson supplied. "I didn't think you had seen her that way, I just don't need you wallowing in self pity--"

"I'm *not*!--And I *want* to rush out to rescue her," Clark said tersely, "but I haven't because I can't afford to tip my hand!"

"Good. I'm glad you're thinking. As for why I asked the question, if the clone had stripped for you, you would have noticed differences immediately. There is some information that hasn't been released the media and it shouldn't leave this room..." He looked around it briefly; nearly everyone took half a step back even as they strained to hear the secret. "Whoever made the clones concentrated on getting the face and the body shape right, but skimmed on other details. You can all use your imaginations about that..."

Several people migrated to the window that looked out into the newsroom, opened slats of the blinds, and peered out in a stealthy manner. "She's still there..." Jonathan said quietly.

"Still eating, too," Uncle Mike observed.

"Good thing there's no flies around here," Jimmy remarked.

Clark didn't want to use his imagination, let alone think of the clone or it snapping at flies. "We have to find Lois." *We,* he thought, I'm saying it, *we.*

"Yes, *we* do, but *we* can't let our emotions override our better sense, even though I'm furious that this has happened on my watch. We do have certain helpful facts at our disposal, like that the clones of the President and his advisor seem to be short-lived knock offs. The last information I received was that they're deteriorating rapidly and loosing IQ, not that they had much to begin with, but enough to suit the needs of their creator, or whoever Mamba's sponsor was--and I suspect Lex Luthor..."

A gasp went around the room. Clark pursed his lips in anger. Jimmy nearly dropped his camera. Alice White said "Damn!" Martha Kent said something similar in Italian. Jonathan Kent squeezed Clark's shoulder harder. Ellen Lane whimpered "My little girl! I thought she looked ill..." Sam Lane allowed her to collapse momentarily against him before maneuvering her to the couch and leaving her there. He turned and announced to one and all, "We must *do* something!"

"I agree," Henderson informed him flatly. "Let's *get a grip,* people... and quiet down... That's better. We can't stay here long, we might raise suspicions. I must assume that Luthor, even with his

limited funds, will be watching for someone..." He looked at Clark, "to discover his trick."

"Well, *I* don't want him to know I know."

"That's good. Your apparent ignorance is the only advantage we have. But if this clone's just a cheap copy, too--though, being female, she may have more stamina..."

"If it, she isn't, doesn't, then we have to act fast," Clark said. He couldn't think why that... that thing out there would make any difference, but it as the only thing he could think to say to get the process moving out of the discussion stage.

"Yes. Well, we're a team now and we need to know what we're up against. Odds are Luthor has Lois, that's what I'm assuming, because it makes sense given his record lately. I'm also assuming they're both still in the area since Luthor spent part of his free time today grabbing Lois and planting the clone."

"How did he arrange to have a clone, or maybe all those clones made from prison?" Mr. Stern asked.

"Probably using bribery, fear, and promises," Henderson replied. "It happens all the time."

"And how did he get out of prison at all without anyone protesting it?" Perry wanted to know and know now.

"It wasn't announced and happened quickly it. I understand the warden got the pardon message and an order to expedite the release--he had 20 minutes. Luthor was out before anyone had time to mount an effective tail. He had friends waiting for him, too, naturally, and friends and employees would have to have made and trained the clones, but I doubt he trusts any of them completely, so that will slow him up, too."

"And Bamba's connection?"

"Probably Luthor's employee. Maybe a clone himself, who knows? There might even be better-made, longer-lasting clones. That one out there might be one of them if Luthor needs a lot of time."

"Time, schmime--are you going to take that" Mike Lane aimed a thumb, "clone thing into custody?" Mike, an ex-Marine, appeared to be gung-ho to help do that.

"I'd love to, sir, but as long as Ms. Lane... Ms. Kent?"

"Lane," Clark sighed. Even if they had decided on a name to share and even if the paperwork bit in the courthouse was the part that counted to the law, he didn't consider himself really married yet and certainly not to that thing out there.

"As long as she's missing, the clone has to remain free and unsuspecting. You," to Clark, "have to continue to pretend everything is normal until we discover where Luthor is holed up. He's probably planning a grand escape, to Europe. Or Africa. Or Asia. We'll be covering all those routes."

Great, Clark sighed. Better call in the Army, too.

He decided to stand up. It was the next best thing to pacing. "Well, I can't just... go along as though everything were perfect..."

"Because it's not. What weddings are? We can throw a few reasonable curves into what Luthor thinks your plans are. Where were you and Lois planning on going after this?"

"Her apartment. It's bigger. I was starting to move in there already and then after our... the honeymoon..." He wished everyone (but Henderson) weren't looking at him with sympathetic eyes. "Ah, we were going to hunt for a new apartment and furniture... but I'm *not* going with that... that..."

"Then don't. Think up a logical reason to postpone it so you can stay in town."

"Logical nothing," Perry snorted. "I'll give you an assignment, Clark, you can't go. I have got something important for you to work on instead--I'll *find* something."

"That will do," Henderson nodded slightly. "I suggest you and the imposter both go to *your* apartment instead of hers. Luthor probably has both places bugged, but hers more so. Go to your place and get cozy--and get information out of her. Be subtle."

"But Lucy and I were planning to throw a big surprise party at Lois's place..." Ellen Lane sighed.

"So much for making Jello in the bathtub," Jimmy mumbled.

"Go ahead with it," the Inspector said. "The Jello, too. We want everything to look normal--but chaotic if possible so Luthor, or whoever else may be responsible for this, will have to be on their toes."

Clark looked at Ellen. "Start the party at her place, realize that... that..." Clark pointed.

"Clone," Henderson supplied.

"...and I aren't coming--"

"Except everyone will refer to her as 'Lois'..." Henderson added deliberately.

"Then you all come to *my* place, okay? Stay all night--stay *all week*--move in, *live* there, don't give us--it--*her* a *moment's* rest, okay? Give *me* a chance to get away and search."

Ellen, startled, nodded. Clark noticed that his mother was nodding as well but in a more calculated manner. Everyone else began to nod, too; they'd give the wronged bridegroom his chance.

And I can give Superman a chance, too, Clark thought.

"That sounds all right," Henderson said. "I'll be coordinating this rescue effort personally so if anyone gets any grand ideas--tell me

or Betty first."

The crowd began to mutter.

Clark looked around quickly and noted that for the moment, deep in thought, no one was looking at him. He lowered his glasses and glanced at the Inspector's face. He had a still fairly fresh shaving cut on one angular cheek, and, deeper, signs that his nose had once been broken. Betty had a small cancerous freckle on her left forearm, so she was in the clear as well. Neither person could ever be suborned, Clark was sure of it. That was a relief.

"Luthor may want to get in touch with his creation again," Henderson explained, "so you should all be watching her for clues--but *not* act in any way out of the ordinary toward her. She must not be allowed to suspect that you think of her of anything but nervous new bride. We must assume she's a... double agent."

Those who knew the Inspector were amazed. There was no doubt that he was in his element now.

"Luthor may still need her," the man concluded. "And she may report right to him if she thinks any of you endanger his plans. Since her critical thinking skills obviously aren't well developed yet, that means you could be in danger even if you act perfectly normally. If you don't want to be part of this, back out now, we'll understand..."

No one made a move toward the door. Clark realized that while they all loved Lois, they liked him a lot, too.

He wasn't sure if he was happy about their staying, though, but there was nothing he could do.

"It will be dangerous," he decided to warn. "Luthor will have to keep in touch with that... that..."

"Clone."

"...if he needs Lois to do anything for him because Lois will *never* cooperate with him, so he'll need that look-alike."

"Even if he doesn't need the clone to sub for Lois, he will want to know what she's found out."

"Like Lois's pin number for those money machines," Jimmy guessed.

"Yes," Henderson nodded.

"That wouldn't help him, she doesn't have..." Clark frowned as something new occurred to him. "No, actually, she does. She has that two hundred million dollars he gave her."

Henderson raised his voice slightly, a sign he was startled. "What?"

Clark looked up. "It was a bribe, sort of, a good faith bribe, ha... Lex put it in an account only she can access. Most of it's in negotiable bonds, but five million dollars is in CDs. Lois hasn't

touched any of it, but she did arrange for all the interest to go to charity."

Ellen Lane wiped her tears. "That's my girl..."

"Is it in the Bank of Metropolis? What branch? We'll stake that out, too. Good thinking, Kent. Okay, people, we've been in here almost long enough to draw suspicion. Clark, get out there and act like an eager bridegroom."

Clark wanted to say "But..." but he didn't because his mom butted in first: "What about Superman?"

The low murmur in the room hushed at the utterance of the magic name.

Little do they know how useless *he's* been, Clark thought sourly.

"We're looking for him, Mrs. Kent. He's our trump card, though personally I don't want to play him right away because I have no doubt that Luthor will be prepared for him and maybe with deadly results." Henderson turned ever so slightly. "Kent, the clone may ask about him since Superman's known to give you and Lois exclusives."

"*I* won't tell her anything."

"Good. If Superman visits to wish you and Lois well, I'm sure he'll notice right away that it's not her."

"Clark sure won't let him kiss her!" Jimmy said on the sly to Perry. Perry looked like he might cuff the young man.

The Inspector ignored this. "Tell him to see me before he charges off half cocked to rescue Lois, all right?"

Half cocked?!

Calm, Kent, calm, calm, calm. "Ah, what if he just wants to look for her?"

"Just look? Fine. If he finds her, I want him to have back up, before he goes in. You tell him that for me."

" 'Back up'?"

"Back. Up. As in 'reinforcements.'"

"Oh." Clark nodded as though he understood.

His mom pulled on him then and he left with her and his father, first out the door, words of encouragement echoing in his ears. Every member of the A-team was pulling for him. They knew he could act the happy newlywed as well as be instrumental in rescuing Lois.

Clark wasn't so sure how he'd do this.

Staff in the newsroom looked up and someone said something about the family getting together to toast the bridegroom, and someone else

said something about understanding why no one had bothered to do the same thing for Lois, who was heading for the lunch room again.

His parents took Clark aside, somehow finding a quiet corner in the hall that led to the restrooms, there on the far side of the candy machine.

"Clark..." his father said carefully.

" 'Back up...' "

"He's right."

"He's **not** right--"

Quietly: "He **is** right--"

"Mom..."

"Promise me you'll do as he asked."

"But--"

"Promise me and your father and Lois. I don't like to put it that way, but Inspector Henderson is right. Lex Luthor expects Superman to charge after him because Superman is as bull headed as you are sometimes and he always charges in."

"But I have to do **something!**"

"Of course you do," his father said reasonably, "as **you** and **you** don't have to fall into any traps. So promise your mother."

"Well, he does expect me, Clark Kent, to panic if I ever even find out, doesn't he..."

"Now you're thinking."

"And millions of police are going to be watching me anyhow..."

They looked around. Betty Reed had eased into view but was giving them enough distance for their private conversation.

"Now you're thinking even better. Promise?"

"Okay, okay, I'll try," because he could see the glimmer of hope, of ideas. "Luthor won't expect **me** to be fighting back."

"Exactly."

"He doesn't know who I am. He doesn't know that I know already and that I have a secret weapon."

"And tons of friends. Now about you, son..."

Clark sighed, "I'm okay, Dad."

"Honey," his mother said gently, "I watched your face drop while you were standing up there and Lois--that clone woman was walking down the aisle toward you--"

"You did?"

"I did. Lois is, was, she was pretty, but you... you're my son and one of the most handsome guys I know, and I wanted to remember how you looked.... Now you mean you feel 'okay' for someone facing the worst situation in his life, don't you?"

"Yeah, Mom, just... just barely..."

"And?"

"And..." he licked his lips. "And I know I have to do it, and I will, and I'll think up some good ideas, too, but... but, Mama," his voice caught and he tried to sigh it out again, "I don't *want* to go home with that... woman."

His father squeezed his shoulder and his mother hugged him again and then smiled. "I have a few ideas that should give you a chance to escape if Ellen can't move her party to your place. I know that she and at least two other women will be glad to help me, too."

"Mom, I don't think you and Dad and everyone who's... who's not police should be getting involved. Luthor might come after me when Lois rejects him and if you two or anyone else who can't defend themselves is in the way..."

"Don't worry, Clark," his father said, "just because we all love you and Lois, that doesn't mean any of us want to get hurt, either, we'll back off as soon as things look dangerous for us."

"Promise? If I ask you to go home, will you?"

They promised.

Clark felt better. "Okay, well, I guess this is it." He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and prepared to face the clone. He would play along for now, he told himself, smile like a fool in love--rescue Lois Lane at the first clue, and, he swore, defeat Lex Luthor once and for all.

To be continued...

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